

DEMOCRATIC POLICY & COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE PANEL HEARING
Testimony by Carol Hardaway

Madam Chairwoman, distinguished Senators, thank you for convening this critical hearing and for the opportunity to share what the House Republican health repeal bill would mean for me and my care. I look forward to testifying before you today.

My name is Carol Hardaway. When I was 32 years old, I reached into my baby's crib only to realize I couldn't feel him. My arm felt like it was asleep, like I must have slept on it wrong. I grabbed my son with the other hand and didn't give it much of a second thought.

Within minutes of arriving at the bar for work, I couldn't hold the glasses and shakers I needed to do my job. It was almost as if someone flipped a switch and my whole right side shut off. Something was wrong, and I needed to go to the hospital, where they tested me for everything – stroke, meningitis, you name it.

The tests were inconclusive, so I was sent home a week later with no diagnosis.

This was January, 1986.

Four years later, I had issues with my vision. It began rapidly deteriorating, taking me from near perfect vision to near legally blind.

I went to an optometrist, who didn't know what was causing this woman in her thirties to lose vision so suddenly. He passed me to an ophthalmologist, then on to a retina specialist, then a neuro-ophthalmologist, who did an MRI.

The scan showed tiny, yet tell-tale, black specks on my brain, lesions. Clearly, multiple sclerosis.

Quite a diagnosis for a single mother whose only son was about to turn five!

As you know, multiple sclerosis, or MS, is a debilitating nervous system disorder. There is no cure.

For me, it has meant reduced mobility, fatigue, excruciatingly painful spasms and the occasional attack, which is an intense period of heightened symptoms. Those days, sometimes weeks, are the worst.

To be clear, MS does not define me. But it does inform how – and where – I live. Allow me to explain.

Beginning in 1995, I lost my health insurance when my then-husband and I started our own business.

From that point forward, I was uninsurable. Along with my debilitating, chronic condition, I've survived two heart attacks. Not exactly the type of risk you'd want on your books.

Funny story: when I tried to qualify for the Texas High Risk pool, which was terrible insurance by the way, I needed declination letters from health insurance companies. Shouldn't be too hard, right? "Um yes, is this xyz insurance? I'd like to enroll in your plan. Female, non-smoker, existing health conditions: two heart attacks, high blood pressure, depression. Oh, and multiple sclerosis."

Every insurer I called laughed at me.

That was what health insurance in America meant before the Affordable Care Act.

That all changed on March 23rd, 2010 when President Obama signed ACA into law. I could not be more grateful to him and every Senator, staffer, and advocate in the room who made that happen. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

My health continued to deteriorate, but I finally had hope. At that point, I was walking with a cane and couldn't always put my own pants on. I had to bring a stool to garden or pick up pecans because I wasn't sure I'd be able to get back up. I would pick up shifts waiting tables in town to pay the bills, but I couldn't always go in. And sometimes when I did go in, I'd fall – taking lunch plates and my dignity down with me.

When the Supreme Court gave governors the option to reject Medicaid expansion, Rick Perry chose politics over the people of Texas. It became painfully clear to me that the only way I was going to be able to get care – and it was becoming urgent – was to leave my home and move to Maryland.

On January 19, 2014, my son showed up to my home in Celina, Texas with a moving truck. The football team came over to help load the truck. Go Bobcats! And thus, began my 1400-mile journey to receive quality, affordable health care.

Within two weeks of moving to Maryland, I started receiving treatments for my MS – 24 years after my initial diagnosis. This is all thanks to the Medicaid expansion.

My weekly shot manages my symptoms and significantly cuts back on my spasms. Because of this, I'm able to work, as a very proud substitute teacher in Wicomico County public schools. When my health declines, usually every six months or so, my neurologist orders an anti-inflammatory steroid infusion. This dramatically improves my mobility, energy, speech, and overall function. As fate would have it, I just got my infusion last week. And look at me! I'm a whole new woman!

The House Republican health repeal bill cuts Medicaid – even after President Trump promised the American people he wouldn't. Under the Republican plan, I would be the biggest loser.

Not only I would lose my Medicaid, the new "age tax" and ending protection for preexisting conditions would make coverage or treatment completely unaffordable.

****EMBARGOED UNTIL WEDNESDAY, MAY 10, 2017 AT 2:30pm****

I'll tell you the same thing I told my Congressman, Andy Harris, before he shut off his phone lines. The House Republican health repeal plan would put me in a wheelchair.

Those who say Medicaid is broken don't know how it has fixed me.

Let me be clear. Just as I STAND here before you as a 63-year-old working woman with MS, Medicaid expansion is working.

Don't let them tell you that I can't see a doctor or a specialist or a hospital or a pharmacy. Not only am I not having any problems with the coverage, Medicaid expansion is my lifeline.

You have got to save it. For me and the millions who depend on the coverage. Fight like hell because we will be fighting like hell right there with you.

With that, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.